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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet explains the importance of understanding global processes that tie the United States to international networks of supply and demand. Geographic knowledge is essential for informed decision-making on planning for the future. On the local level, planning decisions affect businesses as well as individual citizens. The pamphlet begins by discussing the state of geographic illiteracy among U.S. students and explains what geography is and how effective geography education can improve the community. It also suggests how the individual can help to insure quality geography education in community schools. (EH)

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The Complex Issues Facing your Community and Business Require Geographic Knowledge

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National Council
for
Geographic Education

National Council *for* Geographic Education

The Complex Issues Facing Your Community and Business Require Geographic Knowledge

Dear Business or Civic Leader:

The National Council for Geographic Education is dedicated to promoting the highest standards of geographic education in our nation's schools. We undertake this mission because we believe that geographic ignorance is damaging to the country's long-term well being. This pamphlet explains why we invite you to join our effort to improve geography education.

Global processes tie our nation to international networks of supply and demand. A car manufactured by a U.S. firm contains many imported components, and U.S. manufactured computers are sold world-wide. For this reason and others, an industrial firm executive recently noted: "Geographic literacy is now a requisite for the work force in the same sense as reading and mathematics."

On the local level, planning decisions affect all businesses as well as individual citizens. Geographic knowledge is essential for informed decision-making on these crucial issues.

The 3,900 members of the National Council for Geographic Education welcome your involvement in stimulating better geography teaching and learning. You are invited to contact us for additional help to improve geography education in your community.

Sincerely,

Ruth I. Shirey

Ruth I. Shirey
Executive Director

Geographic ignorance is harmful to our country's future

Students in the U.S. know less about geography than students in other countries.

- Surveys show that U. S. students' geography knowledge ranks far below such countries as Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. Lack of geographic knowledge is not restricted to children; in 1992, 23 graduating Harvard University students were asked what causes seasons on Earth. Only two could answer that the tilt of Earth with respect to the sun accounts for the seasons.

Lack of geographic knowledge affects the future of your business, your community, and our country.

- How can residents of your community participate in decisions on land use planning, flood control, industrial development policy, and a multitude of other issues if they lack the background to understand the various options available?
- How can voters develop opinions on such matters as forest management in the Pacific Northwest, development policies for Mississippi River flood plains, or spending billions of dollars to clean up toxic waste dumps if they lack basic geographic knowledge needed to understand these issues?
- How can citizens evaluate U.S. foreign policy options if they know nothing about the countries involved?
- How can people assess the merits of international treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreements (NAFTA) if they are ignorant of the participating countries?

What is Geography?

- Geographers study space and place. They are interested in recognizing and explaining how natural processes and human activities shape our world. Geography is often identified with memorizing facts about rivers, capitals, products, and other seemingly trivial things. Geographers, however, are more concerned about understanding why things are located where they are and how they are related to the location of other features, knowledge which allows us to see how historical processes and present activities influence places. If our understanding is deep enough we can anticipate future developments and plan for them.

Geography for Life: National Geography Standards

- The first ever national geography standards, *Geography for Life*, have been published and are being voluntarily adopted around the country. Since 1994, over 70,000 copies have been purchased. These geography standards are benchmarks against which the content of geography courses at all grade levels can be measured. Standards will affect the education of all children in the United States, and they should be a part of the program of instruction of schools in your community. Copies of *Geography for Life* are available for purchase from the NCGE at the address on the back of this brochure.

Effective Geography Education Can Improve Your Community

Geography education involves gathering and analyzing data.

- Well-designed geographic education programs involve more than just "book learning." Maps are important sources of information, but students should also learn to collect data from print and electronic sources and from field observation in the community, to make their own maps, graphs, and tables, and to present their findings in papers and reports. Well equipped geography classrooms, even in the primary grades, should have computers with mapping and geographic information systems programs that allow students to plot and analyze data distributions. The combination of skills and knowledge gained in well equipped and taught geography classes is of great utility in thousands of work situations.

Geography teaches critical thinking.

- By learning to collect, analyze, and present findings based on their own research, geography students hone critical thinking skills, which helps them to become good problem solvers. These skills help make geography students better informed and more useful employees and citizens.

Geography deals with environmental issues.

- It would be hard to imagine an industry or business that is not involved in some way with environmental issues. Geography students learn about their environment, initially by becoming familiar with the local community and later by learning about places farther away, both within the United States and beyond our borders. Geography students learn about the physical and human elements of the world in which they live and are sensitive to how these elements interact.

Geography education is global education.

- Businesses around the world are becoming increasingly global, and direct corporate investment of U.S. firms is about one-quarter of the world total. Geography students learn about other countries. This global knowledge also makes geography students sensitive to cultural factors that businesses with international operations or with multicultural work forces need to consider.

Geography students can evaluate important issues.

- Business is directly affected by planning decisions. A good background in modern geography prepares students to understand and contribute to debate on local and regional planning, resource utilization, environmental conservation, and land use.

Geography training is career training.

- Skills gained by geography students can prepare them for many kinds of careers such as: teacher, urban and regional planner, land use planner, natural resources analyst/manager, environmental evaluator, retail and wholesale location analyst, cartographer, remote sensing specialist, geographic information systems technician/analyst, tourism and travel planner, real estate sales and appraisal agent, and consultant.

You Can Help to Insure Quality Geography Education in Community Schools

Here are some ways that you, or organizations to which you belong, might support geographic education in your community. These suggestions only scratch the surface; you and your associates may be able to think of more suitable alternatives for your community. Before engaging in any of these activities, check with local school officials about their curricula, policies, and any special needs or priorities they may have.

- Personal involvement —informally discuss your interest in geography education with school leaders at meetings of civic organizations or elsewhere. Ask school officials about the status of geographic education programs in local schools and the qualifications of geography teachers.

- Civic group projects—take on improvement of geography education as an organization activity.

- Equipment donations—contribute out-of-date computers, especially if they are equipped to run and print graphics programs (such contributions qualify for a federal tax deduction). Other types of equipment may also be useful; contact local school officials to find out their needs. Magazines and other publications of geographic interest such as *National Geographic Magazine* may be welcome, along with maps and similar items.

- Financial support—give funds to support college scholarships, summer teacher training programs, study abroad, prizes for winners of geography competitions, or field trips and other appropriate out-of-class student activities.

- Mentorships, apprenticeships, or similar career training or orientation programs—arrange for students to work with mapping or surveying companies, environmental or planning consultants, government planning agencies, or other appropriate organizations.

- Volunteering—help to organize and conduct educational competitions such as the National Geography Olympiad and the National Geographic Society Geography Bee.

- Public relations—promote geographic education programs and publicize student and faculty achievements.

- Citizens advisory positions—run for the local school board, serve on committees to improve geography instruction, or help to implement the National Geography Standards in local schools.

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